February 7, 2016
1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Division
Endangered Species Coordinator
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
R3 Bozeman Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Beaverhead Conservation District
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Dillon
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Enclosed is an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward a stream channel restoration project located on an altered reach of Long Creek, a tributary to the Red Rock River. Long Creek is located immediately upstream of Lima Reservoir, approximately 30 miles east of the community of Lima in Beaverhead County.

Please submit any comments by 11:59 P.M., February 7, 2016 to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the address listed above. The funding for this project through the FFIP is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish & Wildlife Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
Habitat Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Long Creek Channel Restoration

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted sections 87-1-272 through 273, MCA that direct Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The program involves providing funding for physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purpose of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. This legislation was amended again in 2013 to open the program to all native fish species (statute section 87-1-283). The program now calls for the enhancement of native fish through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the FFIP.

The FFIP tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward a stream channel restoration project located on an altered reach of Long Creek, a tributary to the Red Rock River. Long Creek is located immediately upstream of Lima Reservoir, approximately 30 miles east of the community of Lima in Beaverhead County. The overall goal is to re-establish a self-maintaining floodplain environment that could result in an improved and more resilient Arctic grayling population.

I. Location of Project:

This project will be conducted on Long Creek, a tributary to the Red Rock River, located approximately 30 miles east of the community of Lima within Township 13 South, Range 4 West, Sections 21, 28, and 29 in Beaverhead County (Figure 1). The project site is located upstream of the confluence of Long Creek and the Red Rock River on property owned by The Nature Conservancy.

II. Need for the Project:

One goal within FWP's six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to "protect, maintain, and restore native fish populations, their habitats, life cycles, and genetic diversity to ensure stewardship of native species." Long Creek supports a population of Arctic grayling, a federally threatened species and Montana Species of Concern. Restoration of habitat is one of the highest priorities for Arctic grayling conservation in the Centennial Valley. This project will be complemented by an instream flow lease and is expected to make a significant contribution to grayling recovery.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to install nine armored riffle-and-sod grade controls over approximately 3.7 miles of channel, eventually resulting in a pool/riffle stream morphology. Runoff and low-flow water elevations would be raised through the installation of hardened riffles, increasing floodplain connectivity. Abandoned side-channel areas would be re-activated, and fish and aquatic species could

migrate at baseflow conditions. Grazing in the riparian area would be managed. The overall goal is to re-establish a self-maintaining floodplain environment that would result in an improved and more resilient ecological condition for Arctic grayling. This project is expected to cost $61,010. Of this total, the FFIP would be contributing up to $15,000 to complete the project.

Contributor	In-kind services	In-kind cash
The Nature Conservancy Collins Grant		$5,000
The Nature Conservancy General Donations		$8,000
USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program		$23,010
TOTAL = $36,010		

IV. Environmental Impact Review Checklist:

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment

Project Title: Long Creek Channel Restoration
Division/Bureau: Fisheries Division / Habitat Bureau (FFIP)
Description of Project: The FFIP tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward a stream channel restoration project located on an altered reach of Long Creek, a tributary to the Red Rock River. Long Creek is located immediately upstream of Lima Reservoir, approximately 30 miles east of the community of Lima in Beaverhead County.

A. POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture				X		
2. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
3. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)			X			X
4. Existing water right or reservation				X		
5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality			X			X
6. Unique, endangered, or fragile vegetative species				X		
7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats			X			X
8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species			X			X

9. Introduction of new species into an area				X		
10. Changes to abundance or movement of species			X			X

B. POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Noise and/or electrical effects				X		
2. Land use				X		
3. Risk and/or health hazards				X		
4. Community impact				X		
5. Public services/taxes/utilities				X		
6. Potential revenue and/or project maintenance costs				X		
7. Aesthetics and recreation				X		
8. Cultural and historic resources				X		X
9. Evaluation of significance				X		
10. Generate public controversy				X		

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

3. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

No changes in streamflow would occur in Long Creek as a result of the proposed project. Short-term increases in turbidity may occur during project construction. To reduce turbidity, operation of equipment in the stream channel will be minimized to the extent practicable. The Department of Environmental Quality will be contacted to determine narrative conditions required to meet short-term water quality standards and protect aquatic biota (318 authorization).

5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation would be disturbed during the period of construction. Proposed re-vegetation efforts, however, in conjunction with implementing a livestock grazing exclosure, would result in a significant overall improvement to the riparian vegetative community.

7. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Construction activities affecting terrestrial and aquatic life habitats will be short term and would be confined to the project area (stream and floodplain). The mobilization and use of equipment

and installation of grade controls and hardened riffles is expected to disturb habitat temporarily. However, proper permits will be obtained, disturbed habitat will be repaired, and overall habitat will be improved. Willows will be planted. Overall, project activities are expected to improve aquatic and floodplain habitat, thereby enhance the resident fisheries in Long Creek. Improved floodplain function will be beneficial for aquatic, riparian, and terrestrial life.

8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species.

This section of Long Creek supports Arctic grayling, classified as federally sensitive and a Species of Concern in Montana. Restoration of the stream and floodplain, as part of this project, would augment the usable habitat for this species and contribute to its recovery.

10. Changes to abundance or movement of species.

Restoration of Long Creek is expected to increase the abundance of Arctic grayling, which is considered a positive impact.

VI. Explanation of Impacts to the Human Environment

8. Historical and archaeological sites

No cultural or historical resource impacts are anticipated. However, the State Historical Preservation Office will be notified of this project and any potential concerns will be addressed.

VII. Narrative Evaluation and Comment.

There are no anticipated cumulative effects.

VIII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative.

If no funding is provided through the FFIP, either the applicant would have to seek additional sources of funding to complete the project, or the affected area of Long Creek would remain untouched and degraded.

2. The Proposed Alternative.

The proposed alternative intends to provide partial funding through the FFIP to restore a section of stream that has been affected by past livestock grazing practices, altered flow regimes, channel incision, floodplain disconnection, and streambank erosion. The project would restore stream function and connect the stream to the floodplain, increasing available habitat for Arctic grayling and other aquatic and terrestrial species.

IX. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section.

1. Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction:

Beaverhead Conservation District, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, US Army Corps of Engineers, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, State Historic Preservation Office

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

None.

3. Is an EIS required?

No. We conclude, from this review, that the proposed activities will have an overall positive impact on the physical and human environment, and will therefore not require the extensive analysis associated with an EIS.

4. Level of public involvement.

The project application to the FFIP has been posted on the FWP webpage for public comment. No comments have been received to date. The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the FFIP. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, and funding will be contingent upon their approval. The EA will be distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter and will be published on the FWP webpage: **www.fwp.mt.gov**.

5. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 11:59 PM on February 7, 2016.

6. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA.

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Contributor: The Nature Conservancy

FIGURE 1: project location